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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2236
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5059
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4381
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1475
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0845
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0951
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0854
RUEHN/AMEMBASSY OSLO 0988
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN 2166
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 5303
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000846

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PREF KDEM KPAO TH BM

SUBJECT: MFA PROVIDES READ-OUT OF BURMA VISIT

REF: A. BANGKOK 835 (MFA PERMSEC ON BURMA)

IB. BANGKOK 789 (MFA PREPARES PM FOR BURMA TRIP)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

I1. (C) Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej explained views of the international community and offered Thailand's assistance with Burma's political transition during his initial call on Burma's Senior General Than Shwe March 14. Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon held a simultaneous meeting with Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein, in which he conveyed similar points. In a preview of remarks Noppadon would make during his March 20 meeting with Secretary Rice, MFA Director of East Asian Affairs Kallayana Vipattipumiprates (strictly protect) described Thailand as taking a diplomatic approach towards Burma, with an emphasis on reestablishing a relationship of trust between the two countries. Thailand would continue with its policy of noninterference, but felt it was well-placed to offer the Burmese generals a window to Western perceptions of the current political situation in Burma. Kallayana believed that overall the meetings were the best the two countries had had in the past nine years, as they were collegial and focused primarily on bilateral issues of immigration, drugs, trade, and their 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Thailand has an interest in taking a cautious initial approach with the Burmese considering their shared concerns over narcotics trafficking and refugee issues, as well as their economic and energy interdependence. Nevertheless, this does not mitigate the need for us to press

the Thai to use this opening to follow up with effective representations to promote democratic change. We also believe that Samak's off-the-cuff remarks during his solo weekly television program following the visit do not represent a coordinated view of RTG policy. End summary.

¶12. (C) NOTE: MFA Director of East Asian Affairs Kallayana felt it important to share the content of the discussions prior to Foreign Minister Noppadon's meeting with Secretary Rice - particularly in light of PM Samak's subsequent public statements that Kallayana acknowledged could be alarming to Washington. However, Kallayana explained that Noppadon had personally wanted to explain the visit to Rice and that the Foreign Minister would not be pleased to learn that Kallayana had already briefed the Embassy. Kallayana repeatedly asked that we not reveal the extent of our information on the Burma trip during the March 20 call by the Foreign Minister. END NOTE

CONVEYED MESSAGE OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

¶13. (C) PM Samak used his first meeting with Burmese Senior General Than Shwe and General Maung Aye in Nay Pyi Daw on March 13 to open lines of communication between the two countries, stated Kallayana in a March 17 conversation. Samak conveyed the views of the international community regarding Burma's ongoing political development, rather than advising the Burmese on appropriate steps to take. Furthermore, Samak informed Than Shwe that Thailand would "accurately" convey information to the international community about his impressions of the situation in Burma based on his one-day visit to the country. Samak pointedly referred to Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon's March 20 meeting with Secretary Rice as one such opportunity the Thais would

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use to convey the GOB view of the political state of affairs in Burma.

¶14. (C) Thailand considered its willingness to act as an intermediary between the GOB and the outside world to be a valuable diplomatic tool, as the RTG believed that Senior General Than Shwe and General Maung Aye typically received censored reports from fellow Burmese ministers and government officials. Kallayana explained that, in his experience, ordinary GOB officials feared being fired if they presented what the senior generals could interpret as 'bad news.' Whereas if the information was relayed from "a fellow ASEAN partner who stood to be impacted by any problems in Burma" the Burmese generals could be more receptive. It was now up to Thailand to use this new opening to the GOB as widely and constructively as possible, concluded Kallayana.

¶15. (C) At the same time, Samak stressed to the Burmese generals at the beginning of their meeting, and then several times throughout the course of their one-hour discussion, that Thailand was committed to the policy of noninterference.

Samak pointed out to Than Shwe that Thailand had publicly stated this position on numerous occasions and had no interest in interfering in Burma's domestic matters.

¶16. (C) Than Shwe responded to Samak by reviewing the oft-repeated political developments his government had taken to date, including the drafting of the constitution and the scheduling of a national referendum. Kallayana described the Burmese as 'taking note' of Thailand's remarks, but otherwise offering a muted reaction to Thailand's review of the international community position.

SAMAK OFFERS THAILAND'S EXPERIENCE

¶17. (C) Samak then explained to Than Shwe about Thailand's

recent experience with constitution drafting and the carrying out of a national referendum. Samak described Thailand's familiarity with these issues, in addition to its own prior 12-year transition from military dictatorship to democracy (in which Samak was directly involved), as a resource that the GOB could utilize. This was the second time that the RTG offered Burma assistance with its political transition, as first put forth by FM Noppadon on the sidelines of recent ASEAN meetings in Singapore. Again, Than Shwe and Maung Aye took note of Samak's offer, but otherwise did not respond. A bit optimistically, Kallayana added that the Burmese had at least not outright rejected Thailand's offer.

BUT PREFERRED TO FOCUS ON BILATERAL ISSUES

¶18. (C) The thrust of PM Samak's meeting with Than Shwe, and FM Noppadon's simultaneous meeting with Burmese PM Thein Sein, were bilateral matters. Both Thai leaders raised the issue of immigration and the growing presence of illegal Burmese workers in Thailand. They discussed trade and investment matters, emphasizing Thailand's interest in maintaining at a minimum current levels of trade. The leaders reviewed details of shared efforts to fight drug trafficking, including the re-establishment of alternative development projects in the Shan state. Finally, as this year marked the 60th anniversary of Thai-Burmese diplomatic relations, the two countries would organize a series of celebrations and events to commemorate the occasion.

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¶19. (C) PM Samak made a number of unhelpful comments on his Burma visit during his open-ended, unscripted weekly TV show on March 16, in which he addresses the public on a variety of issues. (This broadcast has been one of the venues in which Samak has made very provocative off-the-cuff comments; his remarks about Burma are consistent with this recent statements, for example, downplaying the violent repression of demonstrators here in 1976.) In this live broadcast, Samak said he preferred to talk about bilateral issues with Than Shwe, rather than democracy. "We have three neighbors: Laos, Cambodia and Burma. We use their resources... If we have this great relationship, why should we pick on them?" local press quoted Samak as saying. During his television program, Samak also described the religious devotion of the Burmese junta leaders, noting that Burma has peace and order, and stating that killings and suppressions there were "normal." When asked specifically about Samak's public statements after the visit insinuating that (unspecified) Westerners had a one-sided view of Burma's political problems, Kallayana emphasized that Samak did not criticize the international community or any Western government to the Burmese leaders. The U.S. has never criticized Thailand to others for its close relationship with Burma or Cambodia or Laos, and likewise the RTG would never criticize the USG to other regional leaders, asserted Kallayana.

¶10. (C) Samak did not take a more pro-active approach with the Burmese, explained Kallayana, because the Thai PM felt that if he went in to his first meeting with the Burmese leadership wielding a stick, the Thais would never be invited back. The RTG believed it was limited in what it could accomplish during this initial visit. However, the MFA was already contemplating following up with a mission from its East Asia Division returning to Burma as early as April. Kallayana reiterated that Thailand had a different approach to Burma than that of the USG. But at the end of the day both countries agreed that national reconciliation and dialogue were in the best interests of Burma.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Kallayana made it very clear that he was not authorized to give us a readout of PM Samak's and FM Noppadon's initial meetings with the Burmese leadership. He requested that during Secretary Rice's upcoming meeting with Noppadon we not indicate the extent of our previous knowledge about the Thais' visit to Burma, as Noppadon had made it clear he wanted to personally deliver the news to Secretary Rice. It is important that we honor his request if we want to continue to get briefings of this kind from our MFA counterparts.

¶12. (C) The Thai preferred not to take a strong position with the Burmese during their first round of meetings, but we will press them to use whatever goodwill was created as an opening to work for effective change in Burma. Samak's public comments are disheartening, but these unscripted and unedited statements do not reflect the coordinated view of the RTG. On March 20, on the margins of two events to celebrate the 175th anniversary of our first bilateral treaty, the Ambassador will look for a private moment with the PM to underscore the need to work together privately and publicly to promote democratization in Burma. We emphasized to Kallayana that we look forward to Noppadon's more extensive explanation of Thai foreign policy towards Burma during the upcoming meeting with Secretary Rice.

JOHN